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THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER



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From Rev. J. Scott Willmarth
2 June 1952

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

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The Discipline of Prayer

"Whoso draws near to God one step through
doubtings dim
God will advance a mile in blazing light
to him."

Association Press
124 EAST 28TH STREET, NEW YORK
1916

CONTENTS

	PAGE
CHAPTER I	
THE NATURE OF PRAYER	7
CHAPTER II	
THE NEED FOR PRAYER	21
CHAPTER III	
HINDRANCES AND HELPS	27
CHAPTER IV	
THE SETTING OF PRAYER	47
CHAPTER V	
HOW BEST TO USE THE TIME OF PRAYER.....	52
CHAPTER VI	
EJACULATORY PRAYER	55
CHAPTER VII	
A PLAN OF PRAYER FOR A WEEK	57

CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF PRAYER

I. PRAYER IS MIGHTY, BUT ITS PATHWAY IS HARD

PRAYER is the most mighty instrument placed by God in the hands of man for the establishment of His Kingdom. It was constantly employed by Christ Himself. It can change darkness into light; cast mountains into the midst of the sea; make rough places smooth and crooked places straight; it can populate the desert and cause the wilderness to blossom like the rose. It can heal the sick; make the deaf hear and the dumb speak; cleanse the leper and raise the dead.

Prayer is not the privilege of a favored few. It is not reserved for people of a peculiar temperament. It is placed at the disposal of all. It is intended for all to use. Elijah was a man subject to like passions as we are and he prayed. The man who uses it aright may transform himself and change the world in which he lives. Those who know how to em-

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

ploy it find that they possess a more marvelous power than was conferred by any ~~ancient ring of Gyges, any Oriental "Open, Sesame," any~~ talisman or wishing cap of medieval legend. *Firstly*, because it is true; and *secondly*, because instead of gratifying the capricious desires of a dim and limited outlook it accomplishes the holy and glorious purpose of the everlasting God. What we most passionately desire in our highest moments, that prayer brings to pass. Prayer is therefore a superlative privilege of life.

It seems astonishing that although the use of prayer is attended by such remarkable results yet only comparatively few really use it. The reason is that the habit of prayer demands effort, and we, being indolent, come only as far as the outskirts of the secret and never press up the steep ascent and through the dark cloud to the central sapphire Throne.

Like the Sleeping Beauty of the poet's rhyme, the power of prayer which is in every soul is girt about with a dense hedge:

"All round a hedge upshoots, and shows
At distance like a little wood;
Thorns, ivies, woodbine, mistletoes,
And grapes with bunches red as blood;

THE NATURE OF PRAYER

All creeping plants, a wall of green
Close-matted, bur and brake and briar,
And glimpsing over these, just seen,
High up, the topmost palace-spire."

All the life of that palace and its precincts is arrested. The sap rests in the leaf and the blood along the veins. Fountain and flame alike are still. The butler and the steward and the page are all statue-like, held in the very attitude of the task which occupied them when the slumber fell. The king and his barons sit motionless in sleep at the board. And in "a chamber far apart" sleeps the princess. So for a hundred years she has slept, and so she will sleep until some one shall have courage to break through the dense hedge, enter her chamber and kiss her lips. At last a prince arrives in the neighborhood of the palace. He sees the bones and bodies of those who strove in other days to pass through the hedge

"withered in the thorny close,
Or scatter'd blanching in the grass."

But with the words, "The many fail, the one succeeds," he breaks through the hedge and enters the deserted courtyard and passes to the inner room of the palace.

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

"And all the long-pent stream of life
Dash'd downward in a cataract."

All this familiar story is a parable of the dormant power of prayer. The man who has the courage to break through the thick and thorny hedge and press into the "quiet chamber far apart" will find that he unseals a long-pent stream of power and blessing of which he little dreamed. It amounts to no less than the miracle of raising the dead to life.

"But strait is the gate and narrow is the way . . . and few there be that find it" (Matt. vii. 13). "Strain every nerve to force your way in through the narrow gate" (Luke xiii. 24).

II. PRAYER IS DIFFERENT FROM EVERYTHING ELSE

Prayer IS Something

There *is* such a thing as prayer. That is to say, it is different from everything else. It is, for instance, different from "watching." Jesus said, "Watch *and* pray"; but if prayer had been the same thing as watching, Jesus would either have said "watch," or else He would

THE NATURE OF PRAYER

have said "pray." But He said, "Watch *and* pray." In the same way it may be shown that prayer is different from thinking, meditating, planning, deliberating, and striving with the hands or with the brain. It is sometimes said that we are praying when we do our daily work; or when we are stimulated by the lucid exposition of some difficult theme; or are filled with admiration at a good deed; or are impressed by a beautiful picture or a lovely song. There is a saying that to labor is to pray. Ruskin quotes with approval the Mohammedan saying that "One hour spent in the execution of justice is worth seventy years of prayer." But a little reflection will show that this is only a confused fashion of speaking and not a serious definition. According to this method we might say that a walk on the cliffs in the early morning is a good breakfast; or that we really eat when we put forth our strength in healthy forms of activity; or that one plunge in the sea is worth sixty days of food. All these things are connected with eating in some way. But they are not the same thing as eating. Let anyone try for himself and he will soon find out. In the same way prayer is not the same thing as daily work, or as

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

admiration, or hope, or love, or gratitude, or any other emotion. Prayer is not anything else but prayer, and it is distinct and separate from all beside.

What then is Prayer?

Prayer is the reference of our lives to God. We refer the world of mind and matter to Him and we adore. We refer our sins to Him and we confess. We refer our needs to Him and we make petition. We refer the needs of others to Him and we make intercession. We refer our blessings to Him and we give thanks.

If prayer is different from all else it must follow that *the prayerful life is different from the life in which there is no prayer*. For if we do not refer our lives to God we unconsciously refer them to ourselves or to others. The result of this may be complacency or self-contempt; envy or exultation; satisfaction or remorse; despondency or excitement. But the result of referring our lives to God and viewing them in His presence will be such things as contrition, sense of pardon, aspiration, faith, assurance, acceptance of the will of God, caring for the good of others, peace, joy in the Holy Ghost; there will be other things, too, without

THE NATURE OF PRAYER

a name, which nevertheless subtly operate among men just as nameless elements are potent in the world about us. The man who is possessed by the spirit of these emotions is a different man from him who is possessed by those others and his quality is of a different value in the world. The prayerful life is therefore different from the prayerless life. It moves upon a different path and towards a different goal.

III. PRAYER IS UNIVERSAL AND NATURAL, BUT IT ATTAINS ITS HIGHEST QUALITY IN CHRISTIANITY

Jesus Christ did not invent prayer. He transfigured it. He said "When ye pray" just as He said "When ye fast" and "When ye give alms," thus showing that He assumed that men were already in the habit of praying, just as they were in the habit of fasting and of giving alms. We are familiar with the prayers of many who lived long before Christ's earthly day. We know, for instance, of the prayers of Abraham, Moses, Solomon, Hezekiah, and Daniel. It is also known that the Egyptians prayed. So did the Greeks and the Romans.

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

To-day prayer is a prominent part of the religion of Buddhists and of Mohammedans. It may even be said that prayer is found wherever there is religion: and as religion has been shown to belong to all known ages and to all known peoples we may say that prayer is not an abnormal thing, but it is a natural custom of mankind. But prayer reaches its highest and fullest development in Christianity, since Christ is the fullest revelation of God. Prayer is the yielding of the spirit of man to the Spirit of God, Who draws the souls of all men towards Himself.

IV. JESUS' CONCEPTION OF PRAYER

What Jesus says about prayer is of supreme importance. If we would pray aright we must test our practice by His teaching and be ready to abandon anything that seems in its nature to conflict with that. Only in this way shall we pray prayers that can be called Christian.

The teaching of Jesus is conveyed by His words and by His example.

I. *His Words teach*

(a) *Secrecy.* In Matt. vi. 5, 6, He says

THE NATURE OF PRAYER

"When praying you must not be like the hypocrites. They are fond of standing and praying in the synagogues or at the corners of the wider streets in order that men may see them. . . . But you, whenever you pray, go into your own room and shut the door; then pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father—He who sees in secret—will recompense you."

(b) *Simplicity*. In Matt. vi. 7, 8, He says, "When praying do not use needless repetitions as heathens do, for they expect to be listened to for their multitude of words. Do not, however, imitate them; for your Father knows what things you need before ever you ask Him."

(c) *Certainty*. In Matt. vii. 7-11, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. . . . If you then, imperfect as you are, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in Heaven give good things to those who ask Him."

(d) *Steadfastness*. Luke xviii. 1-7, "He taught them by a parable that they must always pray and never lose heart," etc. The parable of the friend at midnight (Luke xi.

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

5-8) is to the same general effect. Though the answer to our prayers may seem delayed, we must never imagine that God is like an unjust judge or a sleepy friend. God is awake and willing. This encourages us to continue in prayer.

(e) *A Sense of Unworthiness.* Luke xviii. 14.

(f) *A Spirit of Forgiveness.* Mark xi. 25.

2. *The Example of Christ also shows*

The special character of prayer. We can never doubt that the whole of the life of Jesus was permeated by the spirit of prayer, that is, that He lived His life in continual reference to His Father. Whether He was preaching or healing or conversing with His disciples or sitting at the banquet, we are sure that His heart and mind were always open to the glory of God. Nevertheless His disciples did not speak of this condition as prayer, nor can we suppose that Jesus did. Had this blessed consciousness of the presence of His Father been that which He intended by prayer, or had it been more important than what we usually understand by prayer, we may be sure that Christ would have made this vital distinction clear to the

THE NATURE OF PRAYER

disciples. But He did not do so either by His words or by His example. By prayer Jesus evidently meant an engagement of the most definite and deliberate character. The records of His life do not in any way pretend to be an exhaustive inventory of everything He ever did (John xxi. 25), but are, rather, striking sketches from which we can catch His spirit and infer His practice; yet the references to the practice of Jesus in the matter of prayer are such as to leave us in no doubt as to the meaning of His words when He taught His disciples that they should watch and pray.

We notice in the following passages how by both words and actions it is implied that prayer was not with our Lord a mere glance, or sign, or attitude of mind, or passing ejaculation, but rather a sharply defined effort, so engaging and focussing the faculties as to demand all the circumstance of time and place which is demanded by the most serious engagements of business life.

“In the *morning* He rose early, while it was still quite dark, and *leaving the house* He *went away to a solitary place and there prayed*” (Mark i. 35).

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

"At one *place where* He was praying, *when He rose from His knees* one of His disciples said to Him, 'Master, teach us to pray just as John taught His disciples' " (Luke xi. 1).

"One day *when He was* praying by Himself the disciples were present" (Luke ix. 18).

"He made the disciples go on board the boat . . . and leave Him to dismiss the people. When He had done this He *climbed the hill* to pray in *solitude*" (Matt. xiv. 22, 23).

"Sit down here whilst I go yonder and there pray" (Matt. xxvi. 36).

"He Himself *withdrew* from them about a stone's throw and *knelt* down and prayed *repeatedly*" (Luke xxii. 41).

The phrase "as he was wont" (Luke xxii. 39), referring to His going out to Gethsemane, and the subsequent reference to it as "*the place*," would seem to imply that Gethsemane was one of our Lord's places of regular resort for prayer.

The type of prayer that is exhibited by the above passages, which deal with our Lord's practice, is that kind which may be described as "seasonal." At least we may say that it presents prayer to us as a regular, unhurried, deliberate and definite concentration of the

THE NATURE OF PRAYER

faculties, in undivided attention, upon a specific work.

Our survey of the subject has made clear the following facts about the nature of prayer:

1. Prayer is mighty, but the pathway of prayer is hard. It is open to all to use and all are intended to use it. Comparatively few do so, because of indolence. But those who have the courage to persist and to press along the narrow and difficult path are marvellously rewarded. They liberate immense forces of blessing for themselves and for the world.

2. Prayer, while it may enter into all the activities of life, is yet quite separate from everything else. It is not the same thing as work, or as the emotion produced by nature or by art, although these things may create favorable conditions for prayer. Therefore, prayer being different from all else, it follows that the life in which prayer is a custom is a different kind of life from that in which there is no prayer at all.

3. Prayer is not abnormal but is natural. History shows that it is a universal human custom.

4. Jesus Christ, the supreme revelation of God, gave us prayer in its highest form. His

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

example and His teaching reveal five outstanding qualities in prayer : It is marked by *secrecy*, *simplicity*, *certainty*, *steadfastness*, and it is *separate* from all other activities.

CHAPTER II

THE NEED FOR PRAYER

THE world is no longer divided up into separate soundproof continents and nations. It is rather a great whispering gallery. What is whispered in London is heard at once in Shanghai. The conversations in Berlin are audible in Vancouver. Consequently the influence of every good and every bad thing becomes instantly worldwide. It flashes like lightning through all the earth.

The Evils in our Life

There are certain prominent evils in Christendom to-day: national greed or suspicion shown in wars and in warlike preparation; commercial and industrial unrest and avarice evidenced by labor disputes, strikes and vindictive tariffs; luxury, resulting on the one hand in weariness and abuse of life among the rich, and on the other in profound resentment among the poor; tainted political ambi-

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

tions which produce feverish party-spirit and hamper useful legislation; these things are in Christendom. The heathen at home and abroad know of it. And the stain is spreading.

The Great Omission

The one hope of deliverance is in God. But God does not work apart from His people. He comes *to* men *through* men. The hope of the deliverance of the world therefore lies in the Church. In face of the evils in the world what is the Church of the present day doing?

It is in a state of unprecedented activity. Perhaps never before has the Christian Church made use of such multifarious agencies. But what is their nature? What would be the aspect of a composite program of the outstanding events in the year's life in our churches? What is it that the rank and file of church-goers remember as marking the year?

In view of the present world-situation, which is so majestic in its opportunity, what strikes us in the usual list of engagements is its triviality. There is one element wanting that might redeem it all. And that element is prayer. Christ and His apostles placed this openly first. Can we say that we do to-day?

THE NEED FOR PRAYER

Do we Pray?

Let us examine ourselves.

1. *Church prayers.* It may be said that prayers are offered in churches every week and every day. But it is one thing to listen with approval to the prayers uttered by another and it is quite a different thing to pray. It may be very seriously questioned whether the rapid recitation of prayers as practiced in some churches has any real spiritual value at all. It is doubtful if the rhetorical prayers employed in others have any more value.

2. *Church prayer meetings.* The prayer meeting has died out in many churches. In others where it is sustained it is often not attended by the representative men and women of the church, and is generally the least frequented meeting of the week.

3. *Family prayers.* It is notorious that family prayers are being crowded out by the rush of modern life. Many Christian families have even dropped the custom of having family prayers on Sundays.

4. *Individual prayer.* Let the question be put in this way:

What is your time each day for prayer?

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

When do you begin and how long do you continue?

The answer in the majority of cases is that there is no *fixed* time. You have a fixed time for your meals, a fixed time for your business, a fixed time for your games, but for prayer you have no fixed time. You regard prayer as a thing of mood and only to be practiced when you feel in the mood for it. So be it. Then the question is, how often does "the mood" incline you to pray? How often has "the mood" impelled you to spend a whole night in prayer? How often has it impelled you to spend even ten minutes in prayer? Can you mention five occasions during the year? Can you mention even one? It must be seen that the "mood" theory of prayer removes prayer clean out of the category of the serious business of life. We would never tolerate in ourselves or in others the transaction of business by mood. But prayer, the greatest business of life, we make contingent on a mood which, in turn, may be contingent upon wounded pride or corroding jealousy or overindulgence at the table! Furthermore, it must be clear that such a view removes prayer clean outside the most definite teaching of Christ on the sub-

ject. The teaching that "men ought always to pray and not to lose heart" is a teaching which directly contradicts the "mood" view of prayer. "*Violentiam fac tibi ipsi.*" In this matter the words of Thomas à Kempis have the ring of the Master. He would have us do violence to ourselves and declare war upon all our prayerless moods.

It cannot be seriously contended that the examination of the four opportunities for prayer has been reassuring. No striking evidence of the practice of prayer, in any true sense of the word, has been revealed. It is therefore not an exaggeration to say that the majority of the people do not pray.

The Significance of Prayerlessness

There is help in the very fact of the prayerlessness of the Church at large.

1. If a little prayer accomplishes so much, how infinitely greater will be the accomplishment of much prayer!

2. The field is largely uncultivated and the soil is rich. In these days of fierce competition we cry out for an unclaimed sphere. Here is one. You can go in and work it and bring out an abundant harvest if you will.

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

3. There is hope that the rampant foes of the kingdom will be destroyed because the Church still has in reserve the most powerful arm of its forces.

4. The influence of your prayers will pass instantly with the same velocity as other forces to the uttermost parts of the earth. As you kneel in the quiet corner of your solitary chamber alone with God you have the power to-day, as never before, of sending out from your unnoticed place influences which shall touch and transform the cities of China and the islands of the sea.

CHAPTER III

HINDRANCES AND HELPS

I. ALL men have the instinct for prayer just as all men have the instinct for righteousness. The inclination to pray is the movement of God's Spirit in our hearts. But the instinct does not get free play. There are hindrances. This is the reason why so few people pray. All alike have encountered hindrances and most people have been overcome by them owing to lack of instruction or lack of firmness of will. Hence, while the instinct for communion with God is always with them, it is only exercised irregularly, as, for instance, on occasions of great joy or great sorrow, in some great perplexity or in some great trial. And so their prayer-life, instead of being like a steady pulse beating regularly under all their activities, becomes intermittent and their spiritual life suffers from palpitation. Sometimes they are full of enthusiasm, and are upbraiding others for their slackness; at other

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

times they are lukewarm, and impute wrong motives to others for their perseverance in well-doing. They come forward with a brave show of leadership, but when the critical time of burden-bearing arrives and when the spade-work has to be done they are broken reeds, and no reliance can be placed upon them. Some people are miserably conscious of their failure in this respect and cast about for some remedy. Others are defiant and attempt to defend themselves by claiming for themselves a spontaneity in the spiritual life which, they assert, does not belong to their more regular brethren. The true description of such an irregular life is not "spontaneous" but "spasmodic"; and the spasmodic nature is due not to a virtue but to a defect. And that defect is feebleness of will.

2. What are the hindrances to prayer before which our weak human nature quails? What are the things that turn us aside from the exercise of this God-given power of prayer?

There are six that stand out preeminently:

- (a) Wandering thoughts
- (b) Despair in view of the number of subjects for prayer.
- (c) Doubts as to the efficacy of prayer.

HINDRANCES AND HELPS

- (d) Difficulty of place and time for prayer.
- (e) Lack of desire to pray ; and
- (f) (In corporate prayer.) Disturbance from the presence of others.

By one or all of these hindrances the prayer-life has been obstructed. Perhaps the determination to pray has been made afresh only to fail afresh before each one of the hindrances in turn.

Let us examine each one of them briefly, and then let us turn to the remedies with the earnest hope that they may encourage many hearts to bring into play once more the most glorious faculty bestowed on man for the transfiguration of his own life and for the redemption of his fellows.

I. WANDERING THOUGHTS

Their Nature

You kneel down to pray and close your eyes and almost immediately your mind wanders. Instead of praying you find yourself recalling events and conversations of the previous day or forecasting events of the ensuing day. Some trifling noise in the house or in the street sends your mind flying off at a tangent. Even the

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

subject of your prayer seems to suggest a whole host of quite alien matters, and the attention drifts away like a boat on a strong tide, and you awake from your reverie with a start alarmed to find how far you have been carried from your purpose. You may even find that instead of praying you are brooding over some slight or contemplating some retaliation. Perhaps when you are in the attitude of prayer the Evil One makes some of his worst assaults on you. You make a strong effort of will against these difficulties, but after a time the same thing happens again. Again you try and again you relapse. You feel that you are clinging to a mere hollow form. You feel that it is not only a hollow form, it is a hurtful form. It is a time of unhealthy brooding and of undisciplined imagination instead of being a time of spiritual refreshment and strength. By clinging to the observance of such a rite you feel that you are giving way to superstition and credulity and are deluding yourself. So you determine, and determine rightly, that it is better not to set apart a time for prayer at all if it is to be spent like that. You give up the attempt and you drop into the ranks of the intermittent, the spasmodic, and the palpitating

—the ranks of those who drift like derelicts before the stream.

The truth still remains entirely unmodified that the better course is not to abandon the hour of prayer, but to use it aright. How then shall the defect be remedied?

The Cause and Cure of Wandering Thoughts

The causes are various. They may be:

1. Physical, 2. Mental, 3. Spiritual.

1. Physical. (a) *Ill-health*. The mind is so bound up with the body that it is difficult for the spirit to rise when the body is unfit. The very effort to concentrate thought only dissipates it. Are then invalids never to pray? It is here that there emerges the extraordinary paradox of prayer; namely, that one of the most important elements in what Coleridge has described as “the greatest mental effort” is passivity. Let the invalid lie passive and obedient and docile in the hands of God; more sure than ever of His presence the more mysterious the discipline of pain and weakness—and that is truly prayer. No words are needed. No articulated thought is demanded.

(b) *Weariness*. After a short night or a long day of toil it may be impossible to pray

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

collectedly. If the short night has been due to sitting up late over a comfortable fire with an attractive book or a congenial friend, if it has been due to late return from theater or dance, the resolution must be formed that these pleasures shall be curtailed in order that the hour of prayer shall not suffer. The theater and the dance, and even the extra hour with the book or the congenial friend, are *not* necessities. The hour of prayer *is*.

(c) *Posture*. Most people find it helpful to kneel and to close the eyes. Kneeling is a symbol of submission to the will of God and an acknowledgment of His right to reign. The closed eyes are a symbol of the closed door. The world is shut out in order that God may be supreme and that we may see no man save Jesus only. But it may be that this position is for you not a help, but a hindrance. There is nothing binding in the posture. If it helps you more, stand or walk to and fro. If it helps you, pray with your eyes open. Anything that your prayer may be real and that the precious moments dedicated to prayer may not be wasted.

2. *Mental*. The second great cause of wandering thoughts lies in the region of the

mind. It may be that the mind seems unable to work without the stimulus of some motor activity. A very simple but effective remedy in such a case is to pray aloud or to take pencil and paper and write down the prayer. Such practices have been found greatly to assist sustained thought and concentration and continuity of purpose in prayer. Though they may be elementary devices they have launched many a stranded craft into the great deeps.

3. Spiritual. The third main cause is due to the lack of a proper mental starting-point for prayer and the lack of a vital spiritual experience. We come to our knees without asking ourselves the question "Where am I?" Or, if we have recollected that we are before the throne of God, we have omitted to ask ourselves the question "Who is He?" Owing to these omissions you are like a ship without a chart, without a compass and without a rudder and are drifting aimlessly to and fro on the waves. "The man who draws near to God must believe that there is a God and that He proves Himself a rewarder of those who earnestly try to find Him" (Heb. xi. 6). This matter will be dealt with more fully later on. At present two remedies may be recommended

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

briefly for this condition. (1) Place yourself in the presence of God, laying yourself by an act of will utterly at His disposal. (2) Go on to consider more fully (what is implied in your act of will) who God is and what He is to you. In this you will be greatly helped by singing to yourself some hymn of experience such as "When I survey the wondrous cross," or "Praise to the holiest in the height," or "O Love that wilt not let me go." Many have found that after such a beginning as that the difficulty has been not to pray, but to cease praying. This, after all, is the source of all our difficulties in prayer—our forgetfulness of what God is to us and of what we are to Him. Could we but hold that in mind the tide of prayer would sweep through the depleted channels of our souls and fill them brimful of adoration and potent intercession, and all our little helps to prayer would be superseded as the buckets and spades and channels for the irrigation of the thirsty plain are superseded when the weary work of bringing the water up from the river is rendered unnecessary through the abundant opening of the flood gates of heaven.

Nevertheless there are for all of us times

HINDRANCES AND HELPS

of heaviness of spirit when we can "neither fly nor go" and we need the help of such devices as these.

II. DESPAIR IN VIEW OF THE VAST SCOPE OF THE FIELD OF PRAYER

Its Nature

Another kind of hindrance distinct from the hindrance of wandering thoughts is the sense of the vastness of the field of prayer. There seems so much that you *might* pray for and so little that you actually *do* pray for. Your prayer-life seems like a tiny trickle in the midst of a great and terrible wilderness. When you have offered your petitions you rise from your knees haunted by the sense of the vague host of other things which should come within the scope of your prayer-life, but which you never touch. The thought paralyzes you and oppresses you like the sense of duties left undone, and your little fountain of prayer sinks back again and seems powerless to rise.

Remedy for Despair in Intercession

But there is a simple remedy for this diffi-

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

culty too. The host of other things is not so large as it seems. Make a list of those interests in which you find yourself chiefly concerned. Classify them under some such heads as Church, State, and Family. You will find that when you have distributed them in this tripartite division daily throughout the seven days of the week the number which falls on any one day is by no means overwhelming. By allowing reasonable time daily you should be able to touch upon all the chief interests of your life in the course of a week without any sense of hurry or crowding. Then you will find answered in your own life Whittier's beautiful prayer:—

“Let our *ordered lives* confess
The beauty of Thy peace.”

We are sometimes so dazzled by “the glory of the sum of things” that we forget that they are made up of simple elementary parts and are built up according to a regular order. We speak of the genius of the poet and of the artist almost as if their powers were given to them fully developed, and we forget that for each of them there has been a long and painful

HINDRANCES AND HELPS

training and self-discipline before they enjoyed the sense of freedom.

It was a great musician who said that if he omitted his six-hours-a-day practice for one day *he* knew it, if he omitted it for two days the *critics* knew it, and if he omitted it for three days the *public* knew it.

"The heights by great men reached and kept
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upwards in the night.

"The mighty pyramids of stone
That wedge-like cleave the desert airs,
When closer seen and better known,
Are but gigantic flights of stairs."

So it is with prayer. It is, in its highest potency, the fruit of a long self-discipline and practice. It is because we have failed to recognize this that prayer has fallen into such disparagement even amongst Christian people. We have too long allowed it to be regarded as the last refuge of the incompetent and unintelligent, the credulous and superstitious, instead of being what it is—the most glorious and angelic weapon for the establishment of God's kingdom.

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

Doubts as to the Efficacy of Prayer: the Remedy

It is to be noted that Jesus never gives us a philosophy of prayer. He says, "when ye pray." He calls us to start on a higher plane than doubt. He calls us to begin our prayer-life on the plane of faith. Though we examine freely and fully into the nature of prayer, He bids us examine it as we examine the vessel which is actually bearing us across the deep and which needs the fulfilment of certain laws and duties, whether we understand them or not. "The man who draws near to God *must* believe that there is a God and that He proves Himself a rewarder of those who earnestly try to find Him" (Heb. xi. 6). That is to say, you must believe that somehow you will find as a result of your praying that you become endowed with spiritual alertness, and that you will receive guidance, confidence, courage, and peace.

To use an image: First of all you shoot out into the darkness from your storm-tossed ship the frail shaft of faith; the shaft draws after it a rope; the rope a cable; and by the cable you cross to the firm foothold of communion.

III. THE DIFFICULTY OF PLACE AND TIME FOR PRAYER

There is no doubt that prayer should have its own proper place and time just as all the other important engagements of life have their place and time. Domestic, professional, and manual toil all have a distinctive place and time for the exercise of their various functions. It is fitting that the business of prayer, which is the chief business of life, should have a place and a time for its transaction as well.

I. PLACE

The Church for Common Prayer

The natural place for common prayer is the church. It has well been called the house of prayer. But what place shall the individual have for his prayer?

The Room for Private Prayer

If the community occupies a house for common prayer it is natural that the individual should have a room for private prayer. And this is just what Jesus prescribes: "When thou prayest enter into thy room; and when

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

thou hast shut the door pray to thy Father which is in secret." And where each person in a household has a room of his own that room may become a true oratory. A little table and a footstool set apart in one corner with a Bible and one or two prized books of devotion and the missionary list and prayer-manual may become a perpetual call to prayer, and at many other than the stated times of prayer may invite us to come in quietness to God and hold communion with Him.

The Church for Private Prayer

But there are many so placed that they have not the privilege of privacy. Their room is shared by others and there is no opportunity for that quietness which is so vital to true prayer. The fact of the need of privacy and quiet brings home urgently the question whether our churches ought not to be opened for prayer far more than they are. None, however, are so pressed by the company of others as not to be sometimes alone. If a man truly seeks he shall surely find, and faith shall triumph over all difficulties in this as in all else.

2. TIME

The Early Hour the Best

What applies to place applies also to time. There is a private time just as there is a private place. The time of all times for prayer is by universal consent the early morning hour. Then it is that the powers of mind and body are at their freshest. Then it is that the mind is free from the thousand cares that invade it during the day. Then it is that the heart and soul may most easily and blessedly become preoccupied with God.

"Deliberately to call a halt before entering the rush, or in the midst of it, brings a composure that adds effective time to the day."

"F. M. writes: 'The habit of lying until forced to rise makes the sense of rush throughout the day. Though I do scores of times "glance upwards" I cannot thus supply the good of the morning halt.'"

"Damaris: 'In my case, quietness with God for about thirty minutes the first thing in the morning changes the tone of the experiences of the day.'"

"Quartus writes: 'I have found it absolutely essential to my soul's health to get at least

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

thirty to forty-five minutes for private devotion each morning before breakfast. In the strength of that food I can get through my day's work with the helps that come in the day's experiences, but a day's intermission leaves me consciously the poorer and feebler; and a few days' neglect is a sure forerunner of mishaps and mistakes.' "

"The half-hour before breakfast is the chief stratagem point of the day. On the other hand *busy mothers* seem as a rule to have settled upon a *period after breakfast* as a winning position." ¹

Other Times for Prayer

Members of large families who share sleeping rooms and have to hurry off early to the city have found help from a few minutes spent in a city church during the dinner hour.

But such cases are exceptional. Only after a very persevering fight, even for years, should the early morning hour be abandoned.

The Fight for the Early Hour

The fight for the early hour may involve

¹W. R. Maltby's "Study Circle."

some apparently trivial planning. It begins on the previous night. It means early to bed. It may mean the resolute avoidance of the cosy fire on the return from a late meeting. It may mean the setting in readiness overnight of those things from the preparation of which the half-awakened will of the early morning shrinks and which it accepts as an obstacle to action. Dr. Charles Simeon, who did so much to revive Cambridge University life at the beginning of the nineteenth century, tells of desperate means to which he had recourse to win the morning hour. Finding he overslept himself by sleeping again after being called, on each lapse he fined himself five shillings, which went to a deserving widow. But the fines gradually multiplied because he reasoned, with the subtle indulgence of the half-awakened, that the money would be useful to the widow, and that he was doing her a kindness by refusing to rise. He cured himself finally by vowing to throw a guinea into the River Cam every time he overslept. He overslept once more and the guinea was thrown into the Cam. But he never overslept again.

Each in our own way we must fight the battle for the early hour.

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

IV. LACK OF DESIRE TO PRAY

The Cause

This difficulty may arise from some of the hindrances already mentioned, such as wandering thoughts, or doubt, or despair, or physical or mental weariness, or lack of vivid spiritual experience, or preoccupation with other things. If it does not arise from any of these causes it may be due to sin—not sin in the sense of some definite act; but sin in the vague and insidious sense of separation from God; what has been described by a Roman Catholic writer as “not a downright turning of one’s back upon God, but a turning aside or slackening of our tendency to Him as the supreme object of our desires or last end. It is not abandoning God for a creature, but it is a dalliance with unlawful objects whilst still adhering to God.”

The Cure

Lack of desire which is due to this cause must be fought by an act of faith.

V. DISTURBANCE FROM THE PRESENCE OF OTHERS

Its Origin

Some who are refreshed by solitary prayer

find themselves ill at ease when praying, even silently, in the presence of others. They find themselves either criticising the prayers of others or thinking how others will criticise the prayers which they themselves may utter; or it may be that the mere fact of the presence of others disturbs. This is a defect. It may be due to self-consciousness, or to selfishness—a desire to have Christ all to oneself, or to a lack of the community spirit.

Its Remedy

It may be remedied by considering how far we have fallen short in God's sight and how grateful we should be to be permitted to mingle with His people at all; by remembering how much we owe to, and how much we constantly depend upon, others; and by entertaining kindly thoughts of all men just as God has, for Christ's sake, forgiven us.

Believe that your very sinfulness is a passport to the attention of Jesus. He came on purpose for sinners. Rejoice in your sense of need as the very evidence of His hand beckoning you to Him.

Believe that prayer does benefit you by giving you a knowledge of God. Reveal yourself

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

to Him as you would to a human friend, and seek His revelation of Himself by studying the Gospels.

Study carefully the following passages: On *mixed* affection: Ps. lxvi. 18; Jas. iv. 3; Heb. xii. 15. On *weak* affection: Jas. i. 5-7. On imperfectly surrendered will: Jas. iv. 5-10. Fortify yourself with examples, *e. g.*, *John* (Rev. i. 10); *Daniel* (Dan. x.); *Balaam* (Num. xxiv. 1-9).

CHAPTER IV

THE SETTING OF PRAYER

THERE are certain conditions which are unfavorable for prayer, as, for instance, self-indulgence, carelessness, folly, or a quarrel. But there are also certain other conditions which are friendly, and even essential, to prayer and in which it is easy to pray. A wise man will watch these conditions and guard them as the hinterland of prayer.

The Ordered Life

The purposeful life will necessarily be ordered, and the ordered life continually suggests purpose; and high purpose is necessary for high prayer.

1. It is well, therefore, that the man who desires to pray well should order his life well, assign certain tasks to certain hours, and make the very hours a rosary.

2. This orderliness which affects time affects place too, and he who seeks to pray will practice a certain neatness and order even

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

in the arrangement of his room. Medieval pictures of the saints in their studies—*e. g.* Saint Jerome—have reflected for us this subtle note.

3. The same element will pervade his financial affairs. However small the amount of this world's goods committed to his stewardship, the accurate record of it as unto God may be a real means of grace.

4. Another vital element in this connection consists in the faithful discharge of common duties. The answering of letters, the immediate payment of small debts, thoroughness and regularity in the performance of duties whose repetition has made them monotonous—in short, a sense of the sacredness of the component parts of life; all this helps to provide a congenial atmosphere for prayer.

Fasting

Jesus who said "when ye pray" said also "when ye fast." Jesus Himself fasted. He said that His disciples should fast when He was gone. His disciples did fast. The vast majority of Christians have observed certain seasons of fasting all through the Christian centuries. Sir Henry Lunn commends occa-

THE SETTING OF PRAYER

sional fasting for the physical advantages it confers. There can be little doubt that there is a certain kind of fasting that contributes to the efficacy of prayer. Whether we define fasting as abstinence from food or, more usefully, as abstinence from certain things which are not necessities, the pledge of abstinence for a season seems to remind us constantly of that particular object to which our prayers are directed. Experience seems to prove that such abstinence issues in a concentration of spiritual power which would otherwise leak away.

Love

"He prayeth best who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all."

This is the deepest secret of prayer. The resolute eviction from the heart of every thought of bitterness and the steadfast determination to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and think no evil; to suffer long and be kind and to love even as we are loved; prayers that rise from a heart so resolved are gathered by the angel into the golden censer and are mingled with the fire of the

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

altar, and there follow voices and thunderings and lightnings.

Reading

Just as there are many books which unnerve us for prayer, so there are many which predispose us to pray. These will differ with different temperaments.

One Book, indeed, there is for all alike—the Bible. Of other books, some will find the lives of the saints most helpful, such as those of Catherine of Siena, Catherine Booth, Frances Ridley Havergal, Robert Murray M'Cheyne, Joseph Vianney, John Paton, George Müller, Father Damien, D. L. Moody, C. G. Finney, etc.

Others are assisted by special books of devotion such as the "Imitatio Christi," "Bishop Andrewes' Private Devotions," "Great Souls at Prayer," and "Sursum Corda."¹

Others again will find help in poetry; others in music; others in art; others in meditation on some deep argument in philosophy or

¹Among the more recent books few have had an acceptance comparable with Harry Emerson Fosdick's "Meaning of Prayer."

THE SETTING OF PRAYER

theology ; yet others in the unchanging wonder of the book of nature—sky and sea and mountain and forest ; others in the thought or spectacle of a great city. All these are pathways to the throne of God whither we may ascend to adore and give thanks, to confess and to intercede. These things must not be taken as substitutes for the business of prayer and for the sacred time of quiet watching, but should be gratefully welcomed as invitations to the audience chamber of God. The thrill of the invitation can never take the place of the interview with the King.

“Speak to Him thou, for He hears, and Spirit
with spirit may meet ;
Closer is He than breathing, nearer than hands
and feet.”

CHAPTER V

HOW BEST TO USE THE TIME OF PRAYER

The Beginning

Supposing you wish to begin the life of prayer, what should you do? The following suggestions are offered:

1. Fix on a certain time which you can give each day.
2. At first do not let it be long, say fifteen minutes.
3. As far as possible let it be the same time every day; keep it as you would keep an important engagement with a friend.

During this quarter of an hour, then, each day you close the door upon the world and are alone with God.

The Use of the Time

How will you use the time to the best advantage? The time is short and precious and not a moment of it must be lost. You must not be slack, and at the same time you must not be

BEST USE OF PRAYER TIME

in a hurry. Both slackness and hurry are enemies of prayer.

Have your Bible ready at the place of your daily reading. Call to mind each day that God your loving Father has called you to come apart in this way. Remember that He is present. Remember that He will not let you go away without a blessing if you are willing to receive it.

After this begin to read your Bible carefully, thinking over what you read and writing out the verse or the phrase which impresses you most, and take this as the word of God to your soul.

Then while this word of God stirs your heart turn and speak to Him.

You may well begin with some constant form of adoration such as:

“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and
to the Holy Ghost”;

or by singing the verse of a hymn such as:

“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty,
Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee,
Holy, holy, holy, Merciful and Mighty,
God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity.”

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

Give thanks for your life; for home and friends; for interests; for work; and for whatever is good and inspiring and gladdening.

Remember your failures in thought and word and deed. Turn from them, with true sorrow, to God, ask for pardon, and decide upon some course which shall set you free from temptations in future. Consider what God intended you to be and what He can empower you to be, and ask earnestly for that.

Remember the needs of others with whom you meet in your daily life; the sick, the sorrowful, the unfortunate.

Then before you turn to meet the world again hand yourself over confidently into the keeping of God, giving into His hands the keys of all your desires and of all your ambitions. After that go out into the thick of your daily duties, watchful to win at every subtle turn in the conflict through all the hours of the day.

CHAPTER VI

EJACULATORY PRAYER

THE prayer-spirit may be kept alive through the day in the midst of the press of many duties if we sometimes send a very brief prayer winging its way to the throne of God. Such brief ejaculations as these have been found helpful:

Jesus!

All love, all glory be to Thee, O Lord.

Thy will be done!

God only.

My Lord is crucified.

Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?

Father, forgive me.

What Thou wilt; when Thou wilt; as Thou wilt; while Thou wilt.

By some such utterance at any time of the day or night; in the midst of our business or of our pleasures; at the thought of a friend's need or of our own weakness; on being confronted with a sudden difficulty or an overwhelming joy, or even when we are helpless in deliberate prayer—we may touch every

THE DISCIPLINE OF PRAYER

incident of life with heaven and make even a gray and monotonous day flame with an unearthly glory.

Regular prayer does not exclude ejaculatory prayer, nor does ejaculatory prayer make regular prayer unnecessary. Regular prayer is like the great reservoir of water up among the hills which supplies the pipes in thousands of homes many times a day. Reservoir and pipes are mutually dependent and helpful. The reservoir supplies the pipe and the pipe sweetens the reservoir by preventing it from becoming stagnant. And reservoir and pipe are both ultimately dependent upon the gracious bounty of the rain from heaven.

Our daily Bible-reading may become a most helpful source of this brief form of prayer if we store our memory with its phrases and use them to clothe our sudden thoughts and needs.

CHAPTER VII

A PLAN OF PRAYER FOR A WEEK

IT is well for everyone to make a plan of prayer for himself. The blank spaces on page 60 are left for this purpose.

On page 61 the spaces have been filled with special subjects. This plan has been actually in use for some years, but is given here merely as a specimen. Each item mentioned is intended merely as a starting point for such confession, thanksgiving, intercession, adoration or petition as may be appropriate.

Under the heading "Family" are distributed as suggestions for aspiration or meditation the nine fruits of the Spirit. Under "State" are distributed certain public virtues. Under "Church" are given the names of the leading divisions of Christendom at home and abroad, the object being to ask that they may be endowed with grace for their work, and may be led into a closer fellowship in the gospel.

Readers are not advised to adopt it as it stands, but rather to use its suggestions for forming a simpler plan of their own.

A PLAN OF PRAYER
FOR A WEEK

SUNDAY

MONDAY

TUESDAY

WEDNESDAY

THURSDAY

FRIDAY

SATURDAY

FAMILY	CHURCH	STATE
SUNDAY Relatives Friends "Love and Joy"	Missionary Society Minister, Office-Bearers Fellow Members Services Sunday School ROMAN AND GREEK	Other Countries Sunday Observance Peace
MONDAY Relatives Friends "Peace and Long-suffering"	Missionary Society Work directed by women in the Church EPISCOPAL	Government Officials Temperance
TUESDAY Relatives Friends "Gentleness"	Missionary Society Young People's Societies Adult Bible Classes BAPTIST	Colleges and Schools Industry
WEDNESDAY Relatives Friends "Goodness"	Missionary Society Home Missions Mid-week Meeting CONGREGATIONAL	Factories, Mines, and Railways Value of Life
THURSDAY Relatives Friends "Faithfulness"	Missionary Society Sick and Destitute Social Work METHODIST	Hospitals and Infirmaries Prisons and Work-houses Dumb Animals Humanity
FRIDAY Relatives Friends "Meekness"	Missionary Society Boys' Work PRESBYTERIAN	Sailors and Soldiers and Police Order
SATURDAY Relatives Friends "Self-control"	Missionary Society Evangelistic Work SOCIETY OF FRIENDS SALVATION ARMY, ETC.	Trades and Professions and Journalism Service

SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
AT CLAREMONT
California

BV The discipline of prayer. New York,
210 Association Press, 1916.
D5 61p. 17cm.

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